

Chapter 24
The Jamaica Letter
Simon Bolivar
1815

Bolivar's Dream for Latin America

Simon Bolivar, proclaimed "Liberator" by his own people and the most renowned leader of the Latin American independence movement, was born to a wealthy Venezuelan landowning family in 1783. Orphaned at an early age, he was educated by a private tutor who inspired in his pupil an enthusiasm for the principles of the Enlightenment and republicanism. After spending three years in Europe, Bolivar returned to New Spain in 1803, where the death of his new bride plunged him into grief and caused his return to France and Italy. In 1805 in Rome he took a vow to dedicate his life to the liberation of his native land.

On his return he became a leading member of the republican-minded group in Caracas that in 1808 began to agitate for independence and in 1810 deposed the colonial governor. Until his death in 1830, Bolivar dedicated himself to the Latin American independence movement as a publicist, diplomat, theoretician, and statesman. His greatest contribution was as the general who led the armies that defeated the Spaniards and liberated the northern regions of South America.

So-called Jamaica Letter was written in 1815 during a self-imposed exile in Jamaica. It was addressed to "an English gentleman," probably the island's governor, the Duke of Manchester. The Venezuelan Republic had collapsed in May as a result of a viciously fought Spanish counteroffensive, divisions among the revolutionaries, and opposition from many Indians, blacks, and mulattos, who viewed the Creole landowners, not the Spaniards, as their oppressors. The letter was written in response to a request from the Englishman for Bolivar's insights into the background and prospects of the liberation movement.

Questions for Analysis

1. Why does Bolivar believe that Spain's efforts to hold on to its American territories are doomed?
2. What Spanish policies, according to Bolivar, have made Spanish rule odious to him and other revolutionaries?
3. In Bolivar's view, what complicates the task of predicting Spanish American's political future?
4. Does Bolivar's letter reveal concern for the economic and social condition of South America's nonwhite population? What are some of the implications of Bolivar's attitudes?
5. Based on your reading of Bolivar, what guesses can you make about the reasons why the new nations of South America found it difficult to achieve stable republican governments?

1 With what a feeling of gratitude I read that passage in your letter in which you say to me: "I hope
2 that the success which then followed Spanish arms may now turn in favor of their adversaries,
3 the badly oppressed people of South America." I take this hope as a prediction, if it is justice that
4 determines man's contests. Success will crown our efforts, because the destiny of America has
5 been irrevocably decided; the tie that bound her to Spain has been severed. Only a concept
6 maintained that tie and kept the parts of that immense monarchy together. That which formerly
7 bound them now divides them. The hatred that the Peninsula¹ inspired in us is greater than the
8 ocean between us. It would be easier to have the two continents meet than to reconcile the spirits
9 of the two countries. The habit of obedience; a community of interest, of understanding, of
10 religion; mutual goodwill; a tender regard for the birthplace and good name of our forefathers; in
11 short, all that gave rise to our hopes, came to us from Spain. As a result there was born a
12 principle of affinity that seemed eternal, notwithstanding the misbehavior of our rulers which
13 weakened that sympathy, or, rather, that bond enforced by the domination of their rule. At
14 present the contrary attitude persists: we are threatened with the fear of death, dishonor, and
15 every harm; there is nothing we have not suffered at the hands of that unnatural step-mother –
16 Spain. The veil has been torn asunder. We have already seen the light, and it is not our desire to
17 be thrust back into darkness....For this reason America fights desperately, and seldom has
18 desperation failed to achieve victory....

19
20 It is ... difficult to foresee the future fate of the New World, to set down its political principles,
21 or to prophesy what manner of government it will adopt... We inhabit a world apart, separated
22 by broad seas. We are young in the ways of almost all the arts and sciences, although, in a certain
23 manner, we are old in the ways of civilized society.... But we scarcely retain a vestige of what
24 once was; we are, moreover, neither Indian nor European, but a species midway between the
25 legitimate proprietors of this country and the Spanish usurpers. In short, though Americans by
26 birth we derive our rights from Europe, and we have to assert these rights against the rights of
27 the natives, and at the same time we must defend ourselves against the invaders. This places us
28 in a most extraordinary and involved situation....

29
30 The role of the inhabitants of the American hemisphere has for centuries been purely passive.
31 Politically they were non-existent. We are still in a position lower than slavery, and therefore it is
32 more difficult for us to rise to the enjoyment of freedom.... States are slaves because of either the
33 nature or the misuse of their constitutions; a people is therefore enslaved when the government,
34 by its nature or its vices, infringes on and usurps the rights of the citizen or subject. Applying
35 these principles, we find that America was denied not only its freedom but even an active and
36 effective tyranny. Under absolutism there are no recognized limits to the exercise of
37 governmental powers. The will of the great sultan, khan, bey, and other despotic rulers is the
38 supreme law, carried out more or less arbitrarily by the lesser pashas, khans, and satraps of
39 Turkey and Persia, who have an organized system of oppression in which inferiors participate
40 according to the authority vested in them. To them is entrusted the administration of civil,
41 military, political, religious, and tax matters. But, after all is said and done, the ruler of Isfahan
42 are Persians; the viziers of the Grand Turk are Turks and the sultans of Tartary are Tartars....

43
44 How different is our situation! We have been harassed by a conduct which has not only deprived
45 us of our rights but has kept us in a sort of permanent infancy with regard to public affairs. If we

¹ Refers to the Iberian Peninsula, consisting of Spain and Portugal.

1 could at least have managed our domestic affairs and our internal administration, we could have
2 acquainted ourselves with the processes and mechanics of public affairs....

3
4 Americans today, and perhaps to a greater extent than ever before, who live within the Spanish
5 system occupy a position in society no better than that of serfs destined for labor or at best they
6 have no more status than that of mere consumers. Yet even this status is surrounded with galling
7 restrictions, such as being forbidden to grow European crops or to store products which are royal
8 monopolies, or to establish factories of a type the Peninsula itself does not possess. To this add
9 the exclusive trading privileges, even in articles of prime necessity, and the barriers between
10 American provinces, designed to prevent all exchange of trade, traffic, and understanding. In
11 short, do you wish to know what our future held? – simply the cultivation of the fields of indigo,
12 grain, coffee, sugar cane, cacao, and cotton; cattle raising on the broad plains; hunting wild game
13 in the jungles; digging in the earth to mine its gold – but even these limitations could never
14 satisfy the greed of Spain.

15
16 So negative was our existence that I can find nothing comparable in any other civilized society,
17 examine as I may the entire history of time and the politics of all nations. Is it not an outrage and
18 a violation of human rights to expect a land so splendidly endowed, so vast, rich, and populous,
19 to remain merely passive?

20
21 As I have just explained, we were cut off and, as it were, removed from the world in relation to
22 the science of government and administration of the state. We were never viceroys or governors,
23 save in the rarest of instances; seldom archbishops and bishops; diplomats never; as military,
24 only subordinates; as nobles, without royal privileges. In brief, we were neither magistrates nor
25 financiers and seldom merchants – all in flagrant contradiction to our institutions....

26
27 It is harder, Montesquieu² has written, to release a nation from servitude than to enslave a free
28 nation. This truth is proven by the annals of all times, which reveal that most free nations have
29 been put under the yoke, but very few enslaved nations have recovered their liberty. Despite the
30 convictions of history, South Americans have made efforts to obtain liberal, even perfect,
31 institutions, doubtless out of that instinct to aspire to the greatest possible happiness, which,
32 common to all men, is bound to follow in civil societies founded on the principles of justice,
33 liberty, and equality. But are we capable of maintaining in proper balance the difficult charge of
34 a republic? Is it conceivable that a newly emancipated people can soar to the heights of liberty,
35 and, unlike Icarus, neither have its wings melt nor fall into an abyss? Such a marvel is
36 inconceivable and without precedent. There is no reasonable probability to bolster our hopes.

37
38 More than anyone, I desire to see America fashioned into the greatest nation in the world,
39 greatest not so much by virtue of her area and wealth as by her freedom and glory. Although I
40 seek perfection for the government of my country, I cannot persuade myself that the New World
41 can, at the moment be organized as a great republic. Since it is impossible, I dare not desire it;
42 yet much less do I desire to have all America a monarchy because this plan is not only
43 impracticable but also impossible. Wrongs now existing could not be righted, and our

² Montesquieu (1689-1755) was a French philosopher, historian, and jurist best known for his *Spirit of the Laws* (1755) and his theory that the powers of government – executive, legislative, and judicial – must be separated to ensure individual freedom.

1 emancipation would be fruitless. The American states need the care of paternal governments to
2 heal the sores and wounds of despotism and war....

3
4 From the foregoing, we can draw these conclusions: The American provinces are fighting for
5 their freedom, and they will ultimately succeed. Some provinces as a matter of course will form
6 federal and some central republics; the larger areas will inevitably establish monarchies, some of
7 which will fare so badly that they will disintegrate in either present or future revolutions. To
8 consolidate a great monarchy will be no easy task but it will be utterly impossible to consolidate a
9 great republic.

10
11 It is a grandiose idea to think of consolidating the New World into a single nation, united by
12 pacts into a single bond. It is reasoned that, as these parts have a common origin, language,
13 customs, and religion, they ought to have a single government to permit the newly formed states
14 to unite in a confederation. But this is not possible....

15
16 When success is not assured, when the state is weak, and when results are distantly seen, all men
17 hesitate; opinion is divided, passions rage, and the enemy fans these passions in order to win an
18 easy victory because of them. As soon as we are strong and under the guidance of a liberal nation
19 which will lend us her protection, we will achieve accord in cultivating the virtues and talents
20 that lead to glory. Then will we march majestically toward that great prosperity for which South
21 America is destined....